

“Not of man, but of God”

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| <u>Occasion</u> | Evening Service at Therfield Chapel |
| <u>Day, Date & Time</u> | Sunday 4 December 2005 at 18:30 |
| <u>Basis</u> | Galatians 1:11-24 |
| <u>Readings</u> | Galatians 1:10-24 Acts 9:1-6, 15-20 |
| <u>Songs</u> | 315, 314, 687 from Mission Praise 466, 373, 89, 246 from The Source |
| <u>Author/Speaker</u> | Paul Rydon |

What do you think is the source of religious ideas?

Today it is unfashionable to be religious.

Though it has to be said

that the recent rise in Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism has
perhaps through fear
certainly through massive publicity
given Islam a certain standing and deference
that it did not previously enjoy.

Nevertheless, to the western mind,

religion, and especially Christianity,

is outdated, outmoded, and on a par with superstition;

At best a crutch to support the adherent through emotionally stressful times
and at worst a delusion of the mind which leads to fanaticism,
bigotry,
and the worst sin of all ‘intolerance’.

The development of religion is thought to follow some kind of evolution.

Early man, uneducated and insecure,

feared such things as darkness and the unknown
and set out to appease them.

Witchdoctors worshipped the spirits of the forest
and of their ancestors.

The Sun and Moon were so powerful that they were considered greater than themselves.

In time, they realised that the weather was important to their harvests.

Idolatry and polytheism were ubiquitous in the ancient world.

Eventually, people focussed on one God as creator of the universe.

But the Bible presents a different story.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Then he made the living creatures,
then Man and Woman.

He was their only God.
The only one they knew.
In fact he was and is the Only God.
After the fall of man,
sin entered the world and degeneration set in
leading to the creation by sinful man of artificial gods.
And the Bible traces the many ways in which God sought to bring his people
back to worship of himself alone.

By the time of Christ,
the Jews again worshipped only the living God,
but in other parts of the world a wide variety of religions were practiced
from Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism in the east,
to the Greek and Roman gods in the west.

Today in Western society,
science is widely believed to have virtually disproved the existence of God.
For Richard Dawkins,
man, and any other creature for that matter,
is merely a machine transmitting genes from one generation to another.
The gene is king and almost eternal.
God has no place in such a model.

Yet in spite of this, religion is alive and well.

Britain today is more pluralistic than ever before,
with almost every faith, cult, religion and ideology
represented amongst our people.
And religious freedom is axiomatic to our culture,
even though there are signs that that is being slowly undermined.

But the question is:
Is religion man-made,
or of God?

Now the question, framed in that way, pre-supposes the answer,
because the question assumes that there is a God to argue about.
And on my part that was intentional,
because I believe that there is.

Allon Taffs used to say that “Christianity is not a religion”.
The point he was making was that all religions are man-made.
They are imaginations of man’s mind.

But Christianity is of God
and hence, by definition, not a religion.

All religions are lies, but Christianity is true.

Hence Christianity is not a religion.
But the secular world says that neither is Christianity true,
hence it is a religion, just like all the others.

Now it seems that this argument is not a new one.

We meet the great apostle Paul this evening arguing to the Galatians
and those who would lead them astray
that the Gospel he preached, the Christianity he taught,
the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone,
is of God and not of man.

As far as we can judge,
Paul is forced into this defence
because of the activities of a very determined group of Jewish Christians,
whom we will call the Judaizers,
who were following Paul around
teaching the new converts
that they must also accept circumcision
and keep certain other Jewish laws
otherwise they are not real Christians.

We have met these people before in other New Testament books
and they dogged Paul’s ministry for much of his life.

In many ways you can understand where they were coming from.
These men were presumably devout Jews before they became Christians.
They had accepted and believed that Jesus was their Messiah,
but imagined that Christianity was merely a new version of Judaism.
A fulfilment of the Old Testament.

At this point, of course,
they were right.
Christianity is the fulfilment of all that God had planned
throughout the history of mankind
up to the advent of Jesus Christ.

But they had never understood that Jesus came not just to the Jews,
but to every nation,
and that the Gospel freed them from the obligations of the Jewish law.

Hence, they were still felt bound by the law that they had learnt from their youth.

When they accepted Christ as their Messiah,
they were not so much converts,
but believers,

and this is how they are referred to in Acts chapter 2.

So when Paul preached the Gospel to Gentiles – non-Jews –
some of these Jewish believers could not accept that gentile Christians could
remain non-Jews,
and set about teaching that gentile converts must obey at least a part of
the Jewish law.

This incensed Paul who taught that salvation lies in Christ alone
and that we can add nothing to the gift of Grace.
That we are justified only through Christ
and that nothing we do can add one tiny bit to our standing before
God.

Acting with typical Jewish zeal these men followed Paul around,
putting right, as they saw it, the defective ministry of Paul
and corrupting the Gentile churches with Jewish law.
And in doing so, they maligned Paul’s ministry,
saying that what he taught was not of God,
but made up by man.

Interestingly, I was reading the other day a magazine called Shalom,
published by the Church’s Ministry among Jewish people.
In there I read an article saying that one of the problems
of reaching Jews with the Gospel
is that the Church tries to turn converted Jews into gentiles.
Whereas actually they are Jews who have accepted that Jesus is their Messiah
– i.e. Messianic Jews.
Christians? Yes.
But gentiles? No.
The very opposite, or rather the converse,
of what was going on in the early Church.

What we read today is Paul refuting their accusations.

As he says in verse 10, in Paul’s typical rhetorical style,
“Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God?”
“If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ”.

Paul understood,
and we need to understand too,
that we belong to Christ.
We live to a different set of values.
We owe it to him, in allegiance and love,
to obey him and to follow in his ways.

But what Paul is really concerned about is the Gospel.

The Judaizers are attacking it,

and he wants the Galatians to know
that what he preached to them did not come from Man
but from God.
He received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

He takes them back to his past life.
He was once in Judaism.
He was one of the most zealous disciples in the school of Gamaliel.
He outstripped many of his peers.
He was extremely zealous for the traditions of the Fathers.
So much so that he saw Christians as heretics
and set out to destroy the emergent church

We first meet the young Paul, then known as Saul,
at the stoning of Stephen in [Acts 8:57](#)
and we read of his stunning conversion in [Acts 9](#).

He was on his way to Damascus.
At that time a strategic city in the region, with a large Jewish population.
And his mission was to arrest any Christians he could find
and bring them back to Jerusalem for judgement and condemnation.
But God had other plans.

About noon, a bright light from heaven caused Paul to fall to the ground
and the risen Christ said “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me”.

The experience caused temporary blindness
and Paul was three days without food or drink,
before the Lord sent the godly Ananias to his rescue.

For Paul this experience was both his conversion and his commission.
If we go to Paul’s personal account of this episode in Acts 26:15, we read this:
[Read: Acts 26:15-18](#)

Returning then to Galatians,
Paul says, “..... but when God was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I
might preach him among the gentiles, I did not consult any man ...” ([Galatians 1:15-16](#))

Here Paul is at pains to point out that his gospel,
his commission,
came as a direct revelation from Jesus Christ himself.
This is no man-made Gospel that Paul preaches,
but the Gospel of Jesus Christ
designed and planned by God from the beginning of time, or before,
to save his people from their sins
and restore them to a family relationship with himself,
based not on our own efforts,
but solely on the merit and work of Jesus.

Clearly, before his conversion on the Damascus road,
Paul was not ignorant of Jesus,
nor his claims to deity.
All this had been a common debating point among the Pharisees
of whom Paul was a young disciple.
He knew the Old Testament scriptures well
as is evidenced by his powerful arguments in Hebrews,
Romans and elsewhere,
but he had never before acknowledged that Jesus was indeed the
Jewish Messiah,
the one promised down through the centuries to the Jewish people.

Paul knew all the facts,
but had rejected the claims of Christ,
and it took a Damascus Road experience to change his mind.
I wonder what went on between Paul and Jesus during those three days
without food and drink in a darkened room in Damascus alone with Jesus.
Clearly a great deal,
for no sooner was he restored
than he preached in the Synagogue,
confounding the Jews by *proving* that Jesus is the Christ.

This the Jews hated,
and it was not long before the persecutor became the persecuted.
Knowing that they waited at the gates of the city to murder him as he left the city,
friends let him down over the wall
and he escaped.

Within three years he visited Peter in Jerusalem.
Peter was accepted as the apostle of ministry to the Jews
and it must have been a fascinating meeting between these two great
ambassadors for Christ,
one a missionary to the Jews
and the other to the Gentiles.

Leaving Jerusalem, he travelled to Antioch in Syria
and then on to his home town of Tarsus in Cilicia
(today in south eastern Turkey).
It would be fourteen years before he conferred with the mother church in Jerusalem.

In the meantime Paul travelled extensively,
preaching the Gospel revealed to him by God on the Damascus road
and founding, amongst many others,
the very churches to whom he is now writing.

All that the Jewish churches knew was that their erstwhile persecutor was now
preaching the Gospel to the gentiles with great effect
and praised God because of him.

Anyone who has ministered on behalf of God will know the great affection that one has for those converted or disciplined under their ministry.

There is a sense of fatherhood,
a deeply felt jealousy lest anyone should damage their growing faith.
And this is what we see here.

Paul is devastated that the Judaizers had succeeded in perverting the Gospel
and causing the Galatian Gentile Christians to accept Jewish laws.

We shall see,
as we continue through this epistle,
just what that Gospel was.
And we shall discuss and reason with Paul
just why there can be no salvation apart from the death of Christ
and why anything we do towards it is worthless
and detracts from what Christ has done on the cross.

He tells them how Peter ate with the Gentiles until some legalists came from Jerusalem and then drew back in the face of his colleagues.

And he explains that the Jewish law can justify no-one,
hence the only way to be justified is by faith in Jesus alone.

He shows them how Abraham was justified by faith
and that God foresaw the conversion of the Gentiles
when he promised Abraham “all nations will be blessed by you”.
(Galatians 3:6-9)

He explains in Chapter 3 that the law was of God,
but that because of sin, no-one could keep it all,
hence there is no justification other than by faith.
Why then demand that gentiles adhere to Jewish laws?

He longs for their freedom in Christ.
That they should not be bound by unnecessary traditions.

For us then the message is clear.

The Gospel is from God and not from man.

If what we believe is the product of our imaginations then we are to be pitied.
But if what we believe is true,
then it will transform our lives,
and we shall want to share it with all who will listen to our message.

Let no-one take away what you have.
If you doubt what you believe,
then search for answers
and confirm your faith in study and prayer.

Keep close to Jesus.

He is alive and wants a relationship with you.

Don't give up.

Keep meeting with your fellow believers.

Come to Chapel regularly.

Contribute to the worship,

contribute to the work of the Church

and remember that Christ died for you

not only to make you his today,

but for evermore.

May each and every one of us live in the joy of that

as we continue in His way and his work.

May God's blessings rest upon you all.

Amen.

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